Empowering Kids to Cope with Online Risk

Part of my goal to slow down this summer is to catch up on my reading. Recently, I was introduced to the work of several researchers at Penn State (Wisniewski, Jia, Carroll, Xu & Ronsen). This team of researchers from Penn State are in the College of Information Sciences and Technology and some of their work relates to teen safety online.

This spring, the team of Penn State researchers presented data at the Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing Conference. The paper: *Preventative vs. Reactive. How Parental Mediation Influences Teens' Social Media Privacy Behaviors* won an award. Looking at parenting styles in relationship to teens' computer use is critical. The majority of what the average person is exposed to on the topic of teen safety involves filters and blocks. This is counter to what the research says is the most effective way to handle adolescents online behavior. Blocking something doesn't make it go away and often creates secrecy as teens will find a way to get around the blocks or use an unfiltered device.

I have previously written about parenting style and how it affects kids' behavior online. Each researcher defines parenting style differently. In this situation, two parental mediation strategies were defined. The first, Direct Parental Intervention, involves parents intervening through the use of parental controls on a device, filtering software and/or setting up social media privacy settings for them. The second mediation strategy, Active Parental Mediation, involves talking to the teen about the information they post and reviewing the information that the teen posts with them. This is a more communication based strategy.

In discussing this research, we also have to look at what they determined to be risky online behavior. The majority of what I write about is risky online sexual behavior, but there are other things kids do online that are risky. For this study, risky online behavior was defined as sharing of information such as name, birth date and relationship status, sharing of sensitive information such as videos, phone numbers and partaking in risky interactions which could be talking to strangers online or sharing location. They also looked at whether or not teens engaged in risk-coping behaviors which were defined as talking to others about the situation or taking corrected measures to counter the risk (blocking, deleting posts, closing an account.)

While both parenting styles are effective, they are so in different ways. Parents who directly intervene do have children who are more cautious online. These teens sought advice as to how to manage online privacy and didn't really need to take any corrective actions. Therefore, this parenting style helped teens avoid risk.

Though avoidance of risk may feel like it is a good thing, this avoidance has some side effects. Direct intervention and avoidance may prevent teens from experiencing some of the benefits of the internet. It also does not teach kids how to cope with risk and learn from their mistakes. Children whose parents were active mediators did have more autonomy online. They did make more risky disclosures but were afforded the ability to learn how to deal with the online world. The authors suggest that "Parental active mediation allows teens to be more experiential and reflective because their parents are not attempting to directly control their social media privacy behaviors." This research suggests, like the work of Carol Dweck and others, that we need to make mistakes in order to learn how to cope and be effective.

The idea of allowing their child to take some online risks and engage in some risky online behaviors in

terms of privacy might feel uncomfortable to many parents. Most parents fear that if their child is not monitored they will be more at risk for contact with strangers online. This is not necessarily so. The research indicated that teens connecting with strangers or being contacted by others in an uncomfortable manner is something teens worry about too. This risk taking behavior by teens was not associated with either parenting style, meaning that being more restrictive did not make this less likely to happen.

As I continue to advocate, the research indicates that parents have to have open conversations with their children about these issues. You can't just block and not discuss! The authors also suggested the need for parental monitoring software that can be used to facilitate conversations with parents and children. An app such as Pocket Guardian is a great solution as it does not block the device but alerts the parent when certain types of messages are received or sent.

We cannot prevent our children's exposure to sex, risk and cyberbullying. This exposure happens even with the most stringent blocking software in place. We need to educate ourselves and our children. We need to have these difficult conversations. We need to teach children how to cope with risk in a healthy way.

To quote Dr. Wisniewski, "You don't want to parent strictly based on fear, you want to parent based on empowerment.